

9 Embedding employability in language learning: video CV in Spanish

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Abstract

The drive to embed employability in Higher Education (HE) offers a growth opportunity for languages provision. The employability potential of language learning for the global graduate has been analysed by the *Born Global* project on languages and employability (British Academy, 2016). Employers have consistently identified communication and resilience, skills often imparted in learning language programmes, as highly sought after skills (World Economic Forum, 2018). Extensive evidence of the skill-set associated with language learning recently collected in the comprehensive volume *Employability for languages: a handbook*, edited by Corradini, Borthwick, and Gallagher-Brett (2016). In the same spirit of disseminating projects that equip students for real-life situations and introduce them to the world of work, this paper proposes the creation of a video CV as an innovative activity to integrate language learning and employability. Although the case study relates to Spanish, the process and steps identified can be easily adapted to other languages.

Keywords: employability, Spanish, language skills, global graduates, video CV, curriculum vitae.

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1. Introduction

Embedding employability in the curriculum is a Higher Education Academy (HEA) driver that aims to align the needs of the business community, the country, and university students. Alongside this, Brexit challenges the UK's economy and its historical deficiency of language skills as reported by the [British Council's \(2017\) *Languages for the future*](#). In this climate, language proficiency and the intercultural skills that it stimulates will increasingly become a sought after skill-set.

The *Languages and employability* section briefly discusses how this landscape affects language-teaching provision in HE and the opportunity afforded to make explicit their contribution to employability skills. Practitioners are developing innovative, creative, and work-related activities to embed employability. A case in point is the video CV activity discussed in the *Spanish for employability* section. Aside from the language and cultural awareness skills acquired, the activity fosters skills in the use of technology, reflective learning, collaboration, and resilience. Moreover, students learn how to present a positive and wholesome picture of self to prospective employers in Spanish, while gaining an understanding of how others see them, how to negotiate their own image in work environments, and how to collaborate with others.

The conclusion anticipated illustrates how embedding employability into language learning is at the heart of what language teaching professionals do. This truth needs to be made explicit when signposting students to the fact that what they learn in the language classroom translates into highly sought after skills in the world of work.

2. Languages and employability

The drivers for employability and their links to language provision are varied. Since 2010, prestigious bodies from the British Academy to the Confederation of British Industries (CBI) “are calling for a revival of languages to help maintain

and improve UK research and business profiles in a global economy” (Andrés Martínez, 2011, p. 106). This call has become even more urgent nowadays with the UK government considering leaving the European Union.

In 2013, the HEA framework for employability espoused Knight and Yorke’s (2003) assertion that employability is not just about employment, but “a set of achievements, skills, understanding and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (p. 2). Furthermore, the new parameters on Graduate Outcomes Records (GOR) will link to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) from 2018 onwards. In other words, the post-graduation employability record of individual universities and departments will be under scrutiny not only for TEF classification but also for the promotion of programmes with excellent records of success in employability.

Almost a decade ago, the British Academy (2010) launched the *Language Matters* campaign to address an historical decline in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) provision: “[t]he lack of language skills at secondary, tertiary and research levels will affect the UK’s ability to compete effectively in a global market and to promote UK interests in a global context” (p. 1). More recently, the British Academy (2016) commissioned the *Born Global* research project; an up-to-date illustration of what the business landscape in relation to languages looks like. The project draws on data from a diversity of stakeholders such as professionals, executives, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Among the skills particularly appreciated by employers, it identifies a global mind-set and resilience, as well as analytical, linguistic, and intercultural awareness.

The CBI (2017) survey draws similar conclusions by identifying international cultural awareness; business and customer awareness skills as the weaknesses among graduate job seekers. Furthermore, it indicated that a third of employers were dissatisfied with graduates’ attitudes and behaviours of self-management and resilience.

In this respect, Bernardette Holmes (2017), *Born Global* principal investigator, concludes that “the place of Britain on the world stage is likely only to diminish

if its actors are restricted by their inability to communicate in any other language apart from English” (p. 4). [Holmes \(2017\)](#) urges language practitioners to make languages employability skills more visible. Against the background discussed so far, her call conveys a new sense of urgency.

There is also a call from political quarters to take on the *Born Global* recommendations. One such group is the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Modern Languages, led by Baroness Cousins. The APPG called on all political parties for a commitment to promoting language learning in their 2015 manifesto ([APPG, 2015](#)). They stated that government figures show a loss of circa 50 billion GBP a year because of a deficiency of language skills in the workforce ([Richardson, 2014](#)). As mentioned by the [British Academy \(2014\)](#), “[t]he APPG argued that [...] better foreign language skills [were needed] not just for advancing individuals’ education and skills, but to ensure [UK] economy, international engagement, defence, security and community relations remain competitive and sustainable” (para. 2). [Holmes \(2017\)](#) further states that “[t]he Brexit process [has] intensified the urgency to develop a multi-lateral [...] plan in education (from primary school to post-graduate research, including apprenticeships)” (p. 4). They call for specific actions to safeguard the UK’s future requirements as a front-runner in the new global trade scenario and for assurances that the UK education system will produce sufficient linguists to meet its global needs on the international stage. These political allies’ demands echo the call to make language study compulsory in primary and secondary education identified by *Born Global* ([British Academy, 2016](#)).

Likewise, the CBI has consistently stated that language skills are in shortage. Their 2009 survey indicated that only 27% of businesses did not need MFL skills to operate ([CBI, 2009](#)). This corroborates findings by the [British Council \(2011\)](#) survey where speaking another language was considered very or fairly important by 40% of employers. Last year’s CBI survey exposed that just a third (34%) of businesses are satisfied with the foreign language skills of young people entering the job market ([CBI, 2018](#)). Their data also shows that employer satisfaction with the foreign language skills of those leaving education has declined sharply in the past year. It now stands at 34% compared to 42% in 2016. The report highlights

the need for more and better language skills if Britain is to be successful as a global economy.

Despite powerful drivers to embed languages as employability skills in the HE curriculum and stakeholders calling for urgent solutions, serious concerns persist about how the UK is going to bridge the historical gap.

The next section proposes an intervention to respond to this call by making language students aware that they are learning highly sought after skills.

3. Spanish for employability: video CV

The creation of a video CV as an innovative project integrates language learning and employability. Equally, it equips students for real-life situations and introduces them to the world of work. Although the case study relates to Spanish, the process can be easily adapted to other languages. This project caters for students with B1 or near B1 level of the Common European Frame of Reference for languages (CEFR) of Spanish.

A close reference for our work here is the [Corradini et al. \(2016\)](#) volume. As per the activities proposed here, many of those contained in Section 3 of that volume aim to bring the workplace into the classroom. They not only involve students in the creation of their own content but also enable them to identify and articulate the specific personal and professional skills gained through classroom work.

Employability combines “personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skillful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience” ([Owens & Tibby, 2014](#), p. 11). The creation of a video CV allows for the interplay and application of those factors. Activities undertaken during a six-week period as part of the project contribute to the creation of a formally assessed video CV. Additional informally assessed work-related activities such as writing a CV in Spanish and preparing for a job interview feed into the video’s transcript.

Following a three-fold process with clearly designed steps: *plan*, *record*, and *reflect*, students develop employment skills and self-awareness while practicing the language and learning about the labour market in Spain. The activities leading to the video CV encourage group work, interaction, effective communication, and reflection on experience. Step one, *plan*, concentrates on building vocabulary and identifying language related to the world of work in the Spanish job market. Step 2, *record*, focusses on drafting content, and writing work profiles and CVs using the vocabulary and expressions already acquired. In step 3, *reflect*, students compare the content they prepared in Step 2 and review a selection of published video CVs. This is the final stage prior to recording the individual video CVs for assessment. An account of each individual step follows below.

4. Description of the process for creating a video CV in Spanish

At the start of Semester 2, students learn that during six weeks they will be creating a video CV in Spanish. Students have access to computers to access online materials and databases for job information. Students like to talk about what work experience they have already had and about the area of work they would like to dedicate themselves after graduation. Each week, students complete a number of tasks culminating in the creation of a video CV.

4.1. Step one: plan

The project starts with warming up exercises where students build vocabulary by talking about professions and the skill-sets associated with them. Prompted by pictures of firefighters, carers, business entrepreneurs and such, students research the skills needed for each occupation. Next, they move to the personal dimension and talk about their work motivation before researching the Spanish job market for suitable employment via websites such as www.infojobs.net or infoempleo.com. They familiarise themselves with the description of job requirements and ideal candidate profiles for their ideal job. While practising their research skills, they utilise digital dictionaries and other resources such as

www.wordreference.com, www.linguee.com, and translate.google.com, hence using digital and Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills.

In other words, when students are engaging in this first step, they are becoming self-aware of both what they can offer to the world of work and what the world of work has to offer them. They learn vocabulary related to the labour market, explore job market sites in a foreign language, and reflect on their personal goals and future ambitions.

4.2. Step two: record

During two weeks, students are often reminded that careful scripting, redrafting, and rehearsal are the key to a successful video CV. Students manage a variety of foreign language sources to create their work profile and reflect on the weakness and strengths of their own skill-set and personal qualities. To structure and create the first draft of paragraphs describing their qualifications, experiences, and personal qualities, the project follows a comprehensive unit on job hunting hosted by *Didactired*, a peer-reviewed repository of teacher resources, that is a sub-section of the Centro Virtual Cervantes (an organisation similar to the British Council). The unit, published in 2006 by Amparo Massó Porcar in collaboration with Maximiliano Alcañiz García, was based on a trade union document for migrant jobseekers (Massó Porcar & Alcañiz García, 2006; UGT, 2002). Students also explore CV digital templates available at Europass: <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/documents/curriculum-vitae>.

The group work feedback is a rewarding task where students read their personal profiles and welcome observations from peers. The efforts to negotiate meaning and consider whether the statements are too short and lacking in detail or too complex and need simpler utterances are very beneficial to all. Before implementing this task, students have already agreed to learn from each other and maintain an open mind to criticism of their work. One of the mantras they will hear is that ‘we learn from our mistakes, and we learn from others’ mistakes’. A relaxed atmosphere that allows for errors and failure while encouraging redrafting, rehearsal, and trying again is a strong strategy to build resilience.

During this step, students ask themselves how will the world receive what I have to offer. To develop higher levels of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem, students must learn to reflect on and articulate their achievements (Halfpenny, 2016). Students are encouraged to do exactly that, they learn expressions to describe their qualities, they refine the vocabulary about essential and desirable skills, and learn how to present their weaknesses and strengths in a positive way to an employer.

4.3. Step three: reflect

Before production of the video CV, the group watch selected video CVs and then evaluate them via discussion to identify the strengths and weaknesses. The videos themselves contain tips and reflections on what makes a good or bad video CV. According to Sas (2016), an advocate of video CV as a learning task, a video CV provides a “glimpse into who the candidate is like [as] person” (p. 2), better supporting interpersonal skills. Sas (2016) states that video CVs allow for enthusiasm and motivation to become visible, although it also poses risks such as inappropriate disclosure, poor performance, and unethical discrimination, which need to be discussed with students.

In this final stage, we follow Laura Alfonso’s (2013) activity. Creating the video CV demonstrates perseverance and self-motivation. These are further skills that come to play as students redraft their content and take on cues and tips from the videos reviewed. Once again, students will rewrite to add sophistication to their scripts by including expressions to influence others or to express hope, uncertainty, etc. In Spanish, these language functions use the subjunctive mood, a challenge at B1 level. However, according to students, the ‘real world’ situation makes its practice less daunting.

Students have declined an extra session on editing videos with Microsoft Movie Maker, without the quality of the videos having suffered from it. The confidence and self-esteem students gain from making things is another life-long skill that can transfer to work related environments and boost students’ employability prospects. Their video CVs tell their story so far under five, sometimes three

minutes, and it is always a moment of gratification and wonder to see how much of the previous six weeks of work is actually evident in them.

5. Conclusion

Within the remit of the HEA framework for employability and similar drivers discussed in this paper, it is reasonable to conclude that the promotion of programmes with a strong reputation for employability will be considered more sustainable than those perceived as less successful to facilitate graduates' employment.

Against this background, it is important to emphasise the fact that language proficiency and the cultural awareness it develops could provide graduates with the career edge needed in a post-Brexit UK. As a highly sought after skill (39% of employers stated dissatisfaction with graduates' international cultural awareness), language's sustainability can be reinforced as a HE subject.

Language provision can bridge the gap and strengthen alliances with the political efforts of the APPG, the CBI, and the British Academy to fulfil UK future requirements as a front-runner in the new global and free trade scenario.

HE language teaching needs to make explicit its contribution to employability. Practitioners are developing innovative, creative, and flexible activities to embed employability in the curriculum. Such activities foster skills useful for developing emotional intelligence and intercultural skills, such as reflective learning, cultural awareness, and language skills.

According to students' feedback, this project helped them to retain vocabulary, improved their intonation and pronunciation, as well as teaching them strategies for interactions with interlocutors. Furthermore, they valued learning through assessment:

“I found this way of learning interesting and engaging”;

“The activity was good and the assessment structure was suitable for engaging with learning”.

Holmes (2017) advocates for a louder voice among language professionals to broadcast languages’ added value. The author of this paper could not agree more with her statement.

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